Interview with Sean Bannon, afc2016037_04043
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Interviewed at Strickland Funeral Home in Wendell, North Carolina, by Sarah Bryan for Folklife of the Funeral Services Profession

Sarah Bryan: All right. So you had mentioned the epiphany that you first had.

Sean Bannon: Yeah, like I said, I really was going to go to school and study art and advertising, and do what my dad had done with television. Like I said, I was going by the cemetery where he was, where his cremains were, and it's like I had this epiphany. You know. That's the only way I can explain it. So as I said— I prayed about it first, went and talked with my mom and my stepdad—they're both in the medical profession—and like I said, Dad is 86, and he retired last year. My parents got divorced when I was real young, and my mom married my stepdad and my dad married my stepmom. And both of those made perfect sense for my mom and dad. But anyway, talked to a local funeral home, talked to a minister, and found out what you have to do. In North Carolina you're required to serve a year's apprenticeship before or after you go to school. I'm going to be honest with you, the schooling is an absolute waste of time. You learn everything you do in the business while you're doing it, and it is a passed-down, handed-down thing. We're kind of a rarified field. But I'm a firm believer in trade schools. Anyway, but I wanted to make sure this was what I wanted to do. So I called around a bunch of funeral homes. We lived in Rocky Point, which is outside Wilmington, but I got a job working for a corporate funeral home in Wilmington. But they didn't have any apprenticeship. So my sister lived in Morehead City, so I was able to get one with Munden Funeral Home, which was Bill Munden at that time. Very old-school funeral home. You know, we made—we'd work like three or four days straight, like overnight, because they're were doing 400, 500 calls a year, and you know, you know, you make—you go home, you leave and go make a removal at Harkers Island, come back, have to go to Sea Level to the Merchant Marine's home, and all in the same night, and still get up the next morning and have funerals. And I learned a lot. We covered graves by hand, we put up tents—everything, very old-school. You wore a suit for everything you did. Even covering up graves, you just took off your coat. And you have to watch what you do everywhere, because people are always looking at you. You end up bumping into someone you know, and people don't want someone taking care of their parents who are not—don't care, you know? Anyway, I served my apprenticeship, went to mortuary college, I did the whole two-year apprenticeship in a year—and the reason I did that is that I didn't have the money to stay in college. I was in Fayetteville at Fayetteville Tech. And the way it, community college—I don't know if it's still that way, but at the time, after you took a full course load, you could take as many classes as you wanted to. So since I didn't have enough money to stay, I doubled up and did the full thing in a year. And I still worked full-time. I worked at a funeral home. Yeah, I worked at a funeral home in Fayetteville, and I lived above it with like six

other guys, and it was pretty much, you made like slave wages, but it was a room to stay in. Plus you had experience working with families—well, not working with families, but working funerals and stuff. Anyway, passed all my classes and I got licensed, and I went to work for a family funeral home in Durham, Clements Funeral Home. Really great people. Can't say enough good things about them.

Bryan: Is that the one on Broad Street?

Bannon: Mm-hmm.

Bryan: I live on the next block. I can actually see it from my workroom.

Bannon: Yeah. Yeah. So they're really good, it's a family-owned place. But after being there about two years, I realized there was no future for me, because the kids were going to be coming in the business, and there was four owners. I had a friend who worked at a funeral home in Raleigh, and he called me and said, "Look, there's a job that's opened up. You need to come interview for it." I was like, "Well, I don't know." I prayed about it—I do that a lot. Anyway, I got a week's vacation, but I had to take my pager with me from Clements, in case they got so busy that I had to come back. I was going to counsel summer camp for a week. And while I was there praying—and I know it sounds weird, but I was in front of the cross, at Camp Caroline, which is a beautiful place. Anyway, my pager went off, and it was Raleigh calling me saying, "Look, you know, the job's opened up and you need to come interview for it." So as soon as I got through with camp I went and interviewed for it. And the guy who, who hired me—and I'm going to go back to all these people, because actually all of them are doing different things now. But anyway, it was a guy called Paul [Pennell?]. He said, "Well, I never hire on the first interview," and he offered me the job before I left. I went back and thought about it, and I talked with the people at Clements, and Mr. Wicker, who was one of the original starters of the business, a guy named Robert Wicker—great old guy, very old Southern guy—he said, "Well, you can't go to work for them, because they're not going to let you wait on families, because you have to have white in your hair before you wait on families. Because families don't want young people, they want old people to wait on them." And I said, "I'll be bald before that happens."

[00:05:12] So that was pretty much—you know. And they were very good to me, I don't have any— But again, back to kind of the way things were, I lived above the funeral home there, and had to be in every night at nine o'clock. So I'm 21 years old, living in Durham, having to be in at nine o'clock. And if you had to get up and make removals in the night—I found out later you're supposed to put down a full eight hours, but I never did, which was fine, because I was on salary. I actually interviewed with a funeral home in Wilmington, Andrews Funeral Home, which was where I took that job out of college. And the Andrews were real nice, but they said, "We'll pay you 16,000 a year." I said, "Well, I can go to McDonalds and make that. I've been doing this

three years. Can you set any kind of time-frame for like a raise?" And they said, "Well, we can't do that right at this time." That's what got me, took me to Durham. But anyway, I left there, went to work in Raleigh, and was there for about two years—and I hated it. Not because of the people, because I lived above the funeral home there too, and there were two apartments [that I lived in?], and one of my best friends—as a matter of fact he's coming here today, we're going to go see *The Messiah* tonight, at Durham—he lived in the other apartment. And we were like a family, because we all ate together every night, we all worked, and everything. And then [sighs] there was a group called Loewen Group, which later became Alderwood, after they lost like a 460 million dollar lawsuit, that they shouldn't have lost. But anyway, that's something else. But I remember— Anyway, Paul was looking to get a new job, and when Governor Hunt got elected again, Paul got a job—which was really good, which was what he was good at, supervising like [?], things like that. And then Lee Phillips left, um, to go work for another funeral home. And Trent went to go back to Lumberton, where he's from, the Revels Funeral Home, and worked there. Because that's where his family is from. And it's just like, "Everybody is gone." And the people who, the head guys for the area for this corporation—and they kept going up on prices, and up and down, and none of us wanted to wait on families, so—they came in and said, "Well, we're bringing this guy in, and we want you to train him." And I said— You know, get him caught up to speed. And I said, "Well, if I'm going to train him, I'm going to have to do his job, and I'm not going to train my replacement." Okay, all right. Because I was young and a naïve. So they brought this guy in. And he was a nice fellow, but he hadn't been in funeral service, like, ever. He was a more a bean-counter. And we had things where—one person did death certificates. That way you wouldn't have any mistakes, nothing would fall through the cracks, everybody would know who to go back to if something was wrong. Because death certificates are important, because families need them in a timely manner. Anyway. We were having a meeting, and one of the other guys who'd just come in said, "Well, I think each director should do their own," and I said, "Well, I think that's a mistake." And they said, and they said, "Well, we're going to each do their own." And I saw the writing on the wall. I didn't like working for corporate because it was all about money. They didn't care about families. And that's not what I got in this business to do. So, you know, I was like, go and see who can kick in some doors after you close one. I went to go to a continuing education seminar, which you have to do every year, you have to get five hours. Actually I've got two more years of doing it, and I'll be grandfathered in, because you only have to do it for 25. But went to a continuing education seminar and met a guy called Mark Higgins, who I knew through some hospice work—because I'd gone through like hospice training and things like that, grief counseling for kids and stuff like that. And he's like, "Look, well, I'm buying Griffin Funeral Home in Pittsboro and I'd like to talk with you." I'm thinking, I'm just 24 years old, nobody's going to hire me to run his funeral home. But I talked with him, and he did. And he was the best person I ever worked for in my entire life. He owns Hall Wynne Funeral Home in Durham. He's the only person that I ever worked for who cared more about his employees than he did himself. And he cared

about families. And Clements did too, it wasn't business with them either, but that's the difference between independents versus corporates. So I managed his funeral home for about seven years, and then came here and started to buy this one. And about, it's been about 13 years now. I came here to work, very small town, lived up above the funeral home 'til I got married, and my wife wouldn't live up there. Everybody seems to understand that except for me. But I said, "It's quiet, it's safe." Yeah. Anyway, so we get to help, I get to help a lot of people, and it's on a very personal basis. Kind of drives my wife crazy, and my son too, it's kind of hard for him—he's at Michigan State—because when you're out in the public, you know, you see people who you know who are your friends, they're not just clients, so we'd be at dinner and we'd stop and talk to everybody, or they'd come up to the table. We were in Virginia at Busch Gardens, and my wife even told my nephew, because he was thinking of going into the funeral service, and she's like—you've got to realize, we were in Virginia and somebody yells, "Sean! Sean!" You know? And it was somebody that I knew from Pittsboro. I was in Ireland and I bumped into somebody. You know, you meet—you know, because a lot of what you do is meeting and talking with people. Well, I have to sit and listen.

[00:10:15] One of the first questions I'll ask a family is, when it's a spouse, "Where did you two meet?" And that, you get the best stories from that. We still do things very old-school now, but a lot of it's changed. I remember going to continuing education seminars where everyone was in suits. You know, and now, you know, you go and you see people in golf shirts and shorts and things like that. And [sighs] the funeral service has changed. It's getting to where a lot— Like every business, there's bad ones. You can go some places and they charge a ridiculous amount of money. And I'll be the first to say it, we keep our prices very low and fair. Enough to make a profit. We don't get rich, but I can pay my bills. And I've had families tell me that I didn't charge them enough for the amount of services I did. But at two o'clock in the morning on Christmas Day, I get up and I come. You know. And leave everything else behind. And I've got a great staff. Allen, who's working with me, served his apprenticeship, and he's going to be getting his director's license. So I'm glad to be able to pass some of what I've learned. But a lot of it is—like, embalming. We pray before embalming every single body. Nobody else does that. And I'm not saying we're better, but the reason we do that is because the Bible says God gave you gifts and you have to thank Him for them and give Him credit for them. You know, that's what you have to do. Plus each person is someone's mom, or dad, or brother, or sister, and you've got to treat them with that same respect. That was something Mr. Munden taught me. Even when we're embalming, we keep everybody covered, except like the arteries or the femorals, or whatever you have to do. But we take a lot, I take a lot of time in restoring the person, because the moment's not just preservation, you know, temporary preservation. It's about giving the family someone who they watched suffer and go down, go back to nothing, have a better last memory. And people say, "Oh, that's so you can push caskets and embalming." It's not that. My dad, the night I went from the hospital— My dad went through three years of chemo and surgery. He weighed like 80 pounds when he

died. He looked like Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*. The night I went home, he died. He'd been through three years of chemo and surgery, and he wanted to be cremated. We'd, at the time, we didn't know really any better, [?]. So that's what we did. And I have no problem with cremation; it's not personally right for me, but that's not from a monetary standpoint, that's just from my personal thing. But when my step-mom got up and walked into the wall like six years later, she was diagnosed with a glioma. She died like a week after they found it. So I went down and I embalmed her, restored her hair, and we dressed her and put her in a cremation casket. And her mom and all were able to see her, and not see her like she was in the hospice bed. So there is value in viewing. We're a seeing-is-believing society. And if I can make someone look better, give them a better last memory than watching their loved ones suffer, which you always remember, you can say, "I remember all the wonderful times." But that sticks in your head. My memory is my dad laying there, gasping for air. Maybe it's different for other people. In fact, I got a ticket going down there, because the police officer was like, "Where are you going in such a hurry?" And I said, "Well, sir, my step-mom died, and I'm going down to embalm her." And I said, "I've got all my embalming instruments and everything in the back, if you need to see them. And he's like, "Uh—uh—I'm sorry." And he just walked away. You know. But it's changed. Now it's, there's green burials, there's cremation, which is predominantly rising. There's a new thing called alkaline hydrolysis, which I actually am very interested in, and that's another means of disposition. But the thing I tell families, and I encourage them, is, "You can do everything you do with a normal funeral. The funeral is not the casket, it's not the vault, it's seeing the person and saying goodbye and taking those times." We take time for all these things. We do it for a wedding, we do it for a funeral. People will spend $20,000 on a wedding and do that two or three times. You know. My average funeral cost is probably, well, probably $7,500. For everything. Including digging the grave. Obituary. Everything. So—because I believe in the value of taking care of families but not taking advantage of them. I remember looking back at Mr. Munden's old books, and even Clement's old books, and Mr. Munden's old books from when it was started, Mr. Munden. People paid with chickens. It was two chickens a month. But it seems to me like people just—[sighs]—don't care sometimes anymore about their loved one. You know, it's like something, a burden, to get rid of.

[00:15:00] And for a lot of people it is all about money. You know. In North Carolina, you're allowed to prepay your funeral. And there's kind of this big thing, AARP says don't do that, but the reason why is because they're selling New York Life insurance policies that they're making money off of. But if you do come prepay your funeral, you lock your prices in. So even if they do go up, we gain maybe one and a half percent interest, and everything else goes up three percent. So you don't really make enough to cover it, but you're guaranteed those funerals in the future, and you're giving the family, they know that they're not going to have to pay for. You know, except for cash-advance items, which we can't control, the obituary and things like that. But the other thing that people don't understand is that most funeral homes don't have access

to that money, when somebody prepays it. But that being said, again, with the changes of how things are going, obituaries went from four dollars a line to six dollars a line this year, to six dollars and twenty-five a line. You know, like, within like two months of each other. Most of my families now will put a small one in, what the person's name and what their age, and what the services are, and then direct them to our website to read the full obituary, where there's no charge for it. Then people can Facebook it out to their friends. So that's a big change there in funeral service, you know, being more digital, and things like that. A lot of funeral homes will, you know, videotape funerals or Web-broadcast them. We don't do that. But one of the things we do that's kind of nice is that—we used to use bird-releases. And stopped doing it, because I had a friend who released one and a hawk flew down and grabbed the dove right as it went out. And I stopped doing it because I had someone fly under and mess on somebody. But so what we do is we get balloons, and we get string that's earth-friendly, and we do a balloon-release. We give one to each family member. And we'll say something different about each person. It's never the same thing, because everybody's life is unique, and everybody's funeral should be unique. We let them go, and it's really nice. It's kind of a nice thing to do. We have a lot of families now, with the vaults, we can put pictures all over them. Have you ever seen that?

Bryan: I've never seen that. That sounds nice.

Bannon: It is nice. And we have people that come up and they can, they sign the vault after the service. We had one gentleman who passed away, he was killed on a motorcycle, and each of his kids put their handprint on there with tempera paint, and signed their name. Let's see here, pictures. [Looking through photos on phone.] We do things that are personal to each. And when I sit down with a family, I listen to each thing that they're told. You've heard before, you know, you're given two ears to hear and one mouth to talk, so you hear twice as much. And so we try to find out these people, these life story, and tell it. [Showing vault decorated with tobacco leaf designs.] We do a lot with cremation. We actually have a lot of families with what are called salt urns, which are urns made of salt. I don't know if you've heard of them.

Bryan: I've heard of them, I don't know what they are.

Bannon: Well, it's really nice. It's just an urn and it's made of salt, and it's got like a cornsilk bag, so it's completely biodegradable. So you can take it, you can put it in the water, you can bury it in the ground, you can, you know, do all different kinds of things. We've got even eco ones where you can put the cremains and then put a tree on top of it, and the tree will grow around the urn. Green burials is coming, is picking up a little bit. So it's a changing time for us, because people have moved so much, we're a transient society, and nobody's going to go back— Most people are not from the area, so they do cremation because it's simple, and you know, they're not going back to the cemetery, so they can take Mom with them. It's different. But the change in 25 years

from when I started to what it is now—some things remain the same, but it has changed dramatically.

Bryan: How do, say—I'm thinking in this area especially, with a lot of immigrants from other cultures—how does that affect your work?

[Pause in recording when phone rings.]

Bannon: It's kind of funny—it's not funny. I've heard horror stories. A lot of immigrants, there's one ship-out service that works pretty much exclusively with the consulate, and they just don't really treat people well. A lot of people will go to other—you know, will go to ethnic funeral homes, and be treated poorly. I mean, a guy told me his brother, they showed up, they brought to the house, brought the casket, and set it on the ground. You know, I mean, they were totally surprised when we got there, because they wanted to have the person at home.

[00:20:00] You know, the caskets are there, church trucks and everything. They couldn't believe how much different it was, because we treated their brother—his brother, the other one died—with dignity, with a little bit of grace. We had a family, they wanted to stay here all night long, and they had a party and sang Christian music all night long. And that was fine. We set up, we put down tarps in the visitation room, and they were able to have food in there and everything else.

Bryan: Was this a Hispanic family?

Bannon: Yeah. Both of these were Hispanic families. But it's harder to ship somebody back to Mexico, oh my god. Yeah, because you have to do—when you embalm a person you have to do the death certificate, you have to translate it to Spanish, you have to get it notarized, then you have to take it to the Secretary of State's service and get the notarization authenticated, then you have to carry it all to the consulate, where they'll say it's not translated properly and you have to do it all over again. It's, repatriating somebody is like pulling eyeteeth. You know. I mean, it is. It's just—but we're having more and more families that are staying here, though. We have cemetery spaces here and things like that. Everybody does funerals different. Black funerals, when you have the wake everybody sits there. With us, everybody comes around and talks and you have a visitation line or something like that. Black funerals, generally everybody sits down, like in the chapel, they'll have a little service, and then the next day they'll have the service, and they last quite a while. And it's totally different. Like, ours are mostly subdued and everything else, and theirs are very joyful and crying, and animated, and active. When I was in Pittsboro we used to do a lot of black funerals. So. Muslim funerals, they pretty much will just take the person, wrap them in linen and go bury them right in the ground. You know, put a rock over their thing. They have a cemetery for that not too far from here. Buddhist funerals—I was

surprised, when I was in Fayetteville we had a lot of them—you know they usually just sit with their prayer beads, and they do some things, and so forth. And we had a Buddhist funeral here, and the family had like Buddhist priests come from New York. And they transformed our chapel room in like 20 minutes, it looked like a temple. They had gold silk tapestries hanging down from the top all the way to the bottom. And it was a really nice service. And it was different. We're finding a lot more people are doing food and stuff like that. So much that we've considered putting like a, like a place where people can have meals afterwards, because people are getting away from churches. You know, we still have a lot of people, the churches bring food, and everybody brings food. One of the things we do is we bring out, to the families, we bring out plates and cups and napkins, and a chest of ice, and a coffeepot, and a food register, and a register book, and a door spray, and road signs. Things to make it easier. And we don't charge for them, because we use them over and over again—not the plates, obviously. But we're finding more and more families don't even need that because they're not having a headquarters where everybody meets. It's just—changing.

Bryan: Are there ever times when you or other people in the profession, when it's a difficulty either, you know, legally, logistically, spiritually, to accommodate somebody else's funeral traditions?

Bannon: No, no. There's no issue with any of that. Like Mr. Munden used to tell me, "The only thing I care about is the family I'm serving today." I don't care anything about anybody's— When somebody dies, everybody's equal. And I don't care who it is who's died, it's somebody's loved one. The only, biggest issue we have—no, you don't have to pause it, I just need to check something real quick. The only biggest issue that we have now is with cremation. Because we have people, in North Carolina, the way it works is it's the spouse, then it goes from spouse to children who are of age, and then you've got—if none of those are there, parents, brother, sister, and aunts and uncles. There's a degree of how you do it. Then it goes to the person who took due diligent care of the person prior to them dying. And now it's changed with the gay marriage issue, you can have a husband sign for a husband, wives sign for wives. The biggest issue we have is people who got separated but never got divorced. And we've had that happen a lot. We had one gentleman who signed his own paperwork, but—because he and his wife had been separated for 30 years, and he hated her with the flames of a thousand suns. But when she died, the Board—we have the Board of Funeral Service, which is a total waste of taxpayers' money. I mean, it is. But we called them, and several years ago they passed a law that said you could sign your own cremation paperwork. Well, then they said, "Oh, no, it has to be part of a prepaid funeral." I'm like, "Well, you can't change the horse in the middle of the race." So I had to talk with his wife and get her to do it. She came to the funeral, or the visitation we had, because he was cremated, and like, his stepdaughter was pregnant, was threatening to whip her tail. I mean, it was a lot of issues. But, so that was one instance. We had another instance where a gentleman

beat his wife, and they had been separated for a while, and she wasn't but 28 when she died.

[00:25:00] But due to law, he had to sign the paperwork, which also meant that he got the cremains, not her mother. He gave her, he said, "Well, I'll let her have half of them." It was like, this guy, she got divorced because he was abusive to her. I've only gotten angry probably twice, three times, one of which was, I was working in Raleigh, and there was this lady whose son killed her with a clawhammer. I ain't going to say his name, but it's still right here. And her husband—the kid had been on drugs, and she'd gotten away from her husband because he'd been abusive. For 20 years she'd been doing really good. And she let him come back and live with her, and he got high one night and killed her with a clawhammer. And then her husband wanted to go back and see her—ex-husband, they were divorced—and I said, "No, she's not dressed yet." "Well, I was married to her for 20 years." And I said, "Well, look, if you go get a signature from each of the kids, including the one who killed her, in prison, then you can do it. If not, you can wait 'til she is dressed." I hate suicides. I hate children dying. Those are the hardest. Suicides are terrible because people are always left wondering why. It is—it is selfish. And sometimes people do it—I have had people who did it, one gentleman, he had Alzheimer's, one who had cancer. So he sent his wife to the store and killed himself. I had another gentleman— A lot of situations like that, where it's that kind of thing. But when people do it just because— It's terrible.

Bryan: How do you prepare for that sort of thing emotionally? Or how do you, on an ongoing basis, you know, keep your internal resources for handling sad and upsetting cases?

Bannon: Well, I always realize everybody else is having a worse day than I am. Everybody you meet, everybody I meet, is having a worse day than I am. You know? So. And I pray a lot. Excuse me, can we pause for just one second?

[Break in recording]

Bannon: So that's been difficult, especially because two of them were in my son's graduating class and they were friends of his. So that sucks. The gentleman we just picked up, his mother actually worked here. She passed away earlier. So that's tough. But like I say, everybody's having a worse day than I am. So.

Bryan: Is, say—I always wonder about PTSD for people who are in this profession or in this calling.

Bannon: No! I think that's all— No. I'll tell you what I learned. This is when I first started out. When I was serving my apprenticeship there was this little girl who died. She'd had cancer. And they had pictures of her, you know, what she looked like before

she had the cancer, and she was the most, just, an angel. You know? But she'd gotten real big from the steroids and stuff. And at the church, her mother wrote a letter imagining what the little girl was calling back from heaven saying. And I mean, it was packed. And we just all cried. Even Garth, who's like, the guy— I served my apprenticeship under Mr. Munden, and Garth Cooper, he's the one who really trained me. And even he was crying. And that night I went home and I—I got drunk. And the next morning, Garth's like, "All right. See, you learned your lesson. You have to care, but disassociate. You have to let them grieve. This is their grieving process. This is not yours." So you just learn. Now, one of the first guys I worked with was a guy who was named—he was one of the owners of Coble Ward-Smith.[1] His name was Bob Smith. And he called his wife one night and shot himself over the phone. We're apparently like right behind dentists and nurses for suicide. But I think—[sighs] I think a lot of that, it's sad, and it affects you, but [sighs], you know. I didn't lose—I've lost my brother in a car wreck, my dad, my stepmom, my grandparents, several aunts and uncles. So I've seen grief, and I can empathize. I can't sympathize with someone who's lost a wife or a child. But I just, you know. I've got faith. And I know that there is something better than this. So. As far as PTSD, I think that's all—I think it is with soldiers, but with us and what we do, no. Yeah, I mean, I do believe it's real, I don't think that's fake, but with me, I think it's just people—you know, it's an excuse.

Bryan: Okay, yeah. Can you talk a bit about the ministry aspect of your work? I know that much of what you've been telling me has to do with that.

Bannon: Oh sure, yeah. Well, usually before we pick up—like, when we go to make a home removal, or a nursing home, I usually have a prayer with the family, before the service, before we take the person out. You know, we'll all gather round and hold hands, and touch the person who's passed away, and have prayer. There's a lady who died this weekend, I'm going to be doing the service for her. We work really great with the ministers in the area, and so they're all awesome. This lady just happens to be a friend of mine. She was like a grandma to my son. And she'd been—well, she'd had cancer for four years. And so my son said, "Will you do the service? Because you knew her better. "

[00:30:00] I was like, "Sure." And helping people pick songs sometimes for the service. Now, I will tell you, the song I hate the most is "Go Rest High on the Mountain." It's a beautiful song, but we just use it all the time. We always have "Amazing Grace," "How Great Thou Art," and "In the Garden" and "It Is Well." Those are like the four songs we have. Sometimes we have to sing with families, so that's, you know. Plus the fact that we're there caring for them. And they talk to us. I mean, people tell me everything, and I can't tell everybody everything that they tell me. Everybody always wants to know, hear about all the stories, all the fights in the family.

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[1] A funeral home in Wilmington, North Carolina.

Bryan: So there's like a pastoral confidentiality part.

Bannon: I think so. I mean, I'm sure it probably wouldn't hold up in court, but yeah, for me it is. So.

Bryan: This is a related question, but what do you think makes a good funeral director?

Bannon: I'll tell you want Mr. Munden told me. "The day you stop caring about people, you quit your job and walk out the door and never come back." It cannot be a business. Too many people now, they get out of school, and they want these huge salaries, and they don't want to be on call at night, and they don't want to be on call on holidays, and some places have removal teams, and they don't—you know, one director will wait on a family and then he'll pass it off because it's their day off. And we don't do that. We just work straight through. Did that answer it?

Bryan: Yeah, absolutely. I was interested—did you say that your mother and stepfather were both in the medical field?

Bannon: My mom's a nurse and my stepdad's a GP. He went back to school when he was like 30 years old, and graduated from the university. He was a teacher. Graudated from the University of Kentucky, and he retired last year. He was 86 years old. [Showing a picture on his phone of his stepdad delivering a baby.]

Bryan: Did their professional background influence you, do you think?

Bannon: No. No.

Bryan: I know you talked about the moment of epiphany you had.

Bannon: Not a bit. I almost went in the military before I started college. I sat down, got there, the recruiter took me, I was going to take the ASVAB[2], looked around, and I said, "No, this ain't for me. No, this ain't ready for me." I said, "Okay, I'm ready to go." The recruiter looked at me, "You don't want to take this?" I said, "No. No, this ain't for me." So.

Bryan: What do you wish that the general, just the general public, knew about what you do?

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[2] Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test.

Bannon: [Sighs] Most of us devote every minute of our lives to what we do. Because— I don't use an answering service. Some people do. I hate it. I think a person should have to talk to someone God only knows where when their mom has died. Maybe I'm behind the times, I don't know. My life is doing this 365 days a year, 24 hours a day. And we don't all, we're not all rich. We don't all—that's, you know, most of us are just working hard to make it, scrape by and make a decent living. You know?

Bryan: How about how your family—

Bannon: Oh, my wife hates it.

Bryan: Really?

Bannon: Well, she hates, she feels like I'm the public's and not hers, and that—you know, whenever we have an argument, I say, "Do you remember the conversation we had before we got married, where I said, "My job will come before you, and it's not that I don't love you, and if you can accept it, we'll get married, and if not, we need to part ways"? You know, she's like, "Well, yeah, but when you own the funeral home—" "Yeah, that makes it even worse, when you own the business." I said, "When [?] gets licensed maybe we'll have some more time." My son has a lot of anger about it, because—I mean, I try to be, I was there for graduation and [?] matches, and what I can do. But most of the time I'm having to leave them because I have to work. When he was young, he asked me once, "Can I go into— If I don't like doing whatever I'm doing, can I"—he was probably 12—"can I go in the funeral business?" I said, "No." I think he said "in your business." I said, "No." He said, "Why?"

[00:35:00] I said, "Because mine is not a job that you take as just a job. It has to be a calling." I said, "Now, there's a lot of people who do that as just a job," I said, "but that's not the way I see it." So. But he's brilliant. He's studying electrical engineering at Michigan State. He got accepted to their honors program in his sophomore year, which they usually don't do 'til the junior. He gets it all from his mom. He's my stepson, I adopted him—but he's my son—I adopted him when he was seven, met him when he was five. So. Five or six. And he's just, he's a great kid.

Bryan: He sounds great.

Bannon: He is great. He is. But he's also got a totally different attitude than me about life. [Chatting about differing ideas on natural selection.] That's another discrepancy between us, because he's very scientific and believes in evolution, and so forth and so on. And I'm like, "Well, look, there's just as much to prove that it's not." I said, "If you look at the Fermi paradox"—which is this astrophysicist, he was really smart. When somebody asked him, he said, "If you look at all the billions and billions of planets, it would be absolutely ridiculous if there aren't aliens here." You know. In

other words, there should be if there were more. So I said, "So look at that." But that gets into religious things there, so.

Bryan: No, it's—think so too. What does your wife do?

Bannon: Well, she worked at Best Buy for a long time. She worked with the Geek Squad. And then she was, you know, she, many years we scraped, she worked at Lowes and stuff. Then she was, for the last five years of [son's name redacted] to stay at home and be with him. So it's been tough, but we realize that by the time you pay, at the time, childcare, her working was going to cost more than childcare was. So it didn't—and he got her at home, which was—his grades changed. He, you know, [we?] didn't want to be one of those parents like, "Well my kid's really smart, they're just bored," because they act up in school." Kind of— Can I talk about this?

Bryan: Sure, yeah.

Bannon: So we were, when he was like in fifth grade, he was at [school name redacted] Elementary, and he, the teacher called and [?] to class for a parent-teacher conference. And she said, "Well, you know, [son's name redacted] doesn't do this." I said, "Well, does he understand the material and is he proficient and can apply it?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Then I'm fine with that, because you're giving him numbers instead of grades. I'm fine with having a three." "But he doesn't help with the other kids." And I said, "That's not his job, that's yours. I mean, he's reading *Harry Potter*, they're reading *Clifford the Big Red Dog*. You know, your job is there, you've got an assistant to help." "Well, I asked [pronounces "asked" "axed"] him to do something else." This was terrible of me, and I shouldn't have. I said, "I'm sorry, what?" She said, I asked ["axed"] him to do something else." And my wife was kicking him under the table. And I said, "You mean you *asked* him to do something?" And this was their teacher of the year, an English teacher. Really nice lady, but I was offended that she called us in because [son's name redacted] wasn't helping her with her class. And, so that. You know. When he got ready to start high school, we sat him down, said, "Look, this is your job. If you do it, then you'll get your video games and stuff like that. If not, you're not going to be 18 and living at home. It's not going to happen." Because it's not how I was raised. I grew up on a farm, we worked, I had a job all through high school. I had my first job when I was 13, cleaning dog kennels, because my dad said, "If you want a car, you'll have to pay for it." Or the insurance. So. I worked all through high school, played football and basketball. I was *eh* at basketball, good at football, terrible at baseball—tried that one year. And, you know, I paid for my college myself, and I paid for all the other things, because that's how I was raised. You know? You don't have everything handed to you. And when he wanted to go to college, I said, "Look, if you want to go to NC State, I'll try and help you pay for it, because I can afford that. If you go to Michigan State, I cannot do $40,000 a year." And it's a great program, I have no doubt about it, in lots of things. I said, "If you do it, you're going to pay for it." So that's been a big bone of

contention. But anyway, he buckled down when he started high school, and having [wife's name redacted] at home made a big difference. He was like .5 away from being valedictorian. At the school here—they have like four different schools—there was engineering, there was like farming—there was four different schools and he was in the engineering program.

[00:40:05] He did really well. He's a good kid.

Bryan: Sounds like a smart kid too.

Bannon: Yeah. He doesn't drink, doesn't do drugs. He realizes, you know, "I've got time for girls and stuff. Right now I got to get"—he's focused on the right thing, which is good.

Bryan: That's great. So now, you're from Pender County originally?

Bannon: Yeah. Rocky Point, in between Castle Hayne and Burgaw.

Bryan: I like that area a lot.

Bannon: I worked at Paul's Place Hot Dogs in high school.

Bryan: Oh, wow!

Bannon: I think everybody in Pender County worked there.

Bryan: What are your memories of—did you go to any funerals when you were a child or a teenager?

Bannon: No. First funeral I went to was, um—it was my granddad's, I think.

Bryan: And was he from that area too?

Bannon: Yeah, he was from Wilmington. It was weird, he was like—they lived in this area of town near Sunset Skating Rink, and their whole back yard, right in the middle of Wilmington, was fenced in, as a vegetable garden. We're talking like as far as from this to that room there. Full of vegetables. And we'd all get together with the family and shell beans. We'd get together on Fridays, or on Sundays, at Grandma's house and have dinner with all the family. And I'm from a big family. My mom had several brothers and sisters, and lots of cousins and stuff. And I hate that that's kind of, when Grandma died we just kind of stopped doing that, you know? I hated that. So. But everybody lives everywhere—I got a sister lives in England, brother lives in Erwin,

one of my sisters lives on the farm, one of them lives in Wilmington, one of them lives in the mountains.

Bryan: So your farm's still in your family, then.

Bannon: Oh, yeah.

Bryan: That's unusual these days.

Bannon: Well, no, I mean—they bought the farm in like 'eighty something. So it wasn't like we were farmers. We did, you know, do some, but Dad and Mom pretty much just rented out the farmlands. You either got to go big and have a bunch of farms, or you can't do it anymore.

Bryan: Well, this has been fantastic, and you've answered all the questions I came with, but is there anything that you'd like to add, or anything that you'd like to address that you think is important to include in this?

Bannon: Just remember that your mom or your dad or your brother took care of you all your life, so they're not just something to be discarded of or disposed of like yesterday's news. You know? Don't just dispose of them and act like nothing happened. You can't, you cannot get away from your grief. It's going to be there no matter what. And just because— [Sighs] No matter what your faith is, take time to say goodbye, whatever it is. Yep. That's it.

[Pause in recording]

Bryan: Okay.

Bannon: Funeral service is probably the one business that has stayed segregated. Black people go to black funeral homes and white people go to white funeral homes. And that sucks. 'Cause, you know, I'll never forget, when I was in Pittsboro, like I said, we did a lot of black funerals there, because Mr. [name redacted]'s daddy started the business, [name redacted]. And he used to have black and white funerals together. Like, I mean, when segregation was going on, he went on black funerals and white funerals. I'll never forget, Mr. [name redacted], his grandson, whose dad and mom gave their life to the business, [name redacted] didn't want to get in the business but he was a really good funeral director, came back when his dad died to help his mom. He was— There was a lady who came in, he remembered when he was a little boy their burying, like, all her family. And she came in and told her that it was "time for us to be buried by our own." Broke his heart. And he had no use for her after that. He's like, "My grandparents, when everybody else was segregated, was helping them take care of them when they didn't have anything, and this is how we're treated now?" And the

black ministers preach it; and I've heard it: one of them said, "You need to spend your money with your brother. You don't need to spend it with the white man." And again, here, when nobody else was there for you, when everybody was family, now you're trying to separate us. So that's been a big issue. Because to me, a family's a family, I don't care what color you are. And that really bothered him. That always stuck in his craw. And it always bothered me. I mean, Mr. [name redacted] had, we had four black people on the staff. Not—funeral directors and stuff who took care of them and stuff. Everything was coordinated to do that, and then just to be, you know, for him to be crapped on really broke his heart. And if you get a chance, you need to interview Mark Higgins. He owns Hall-Wynne in Durham.

Bryan: Oh, you know what, I think I have actually just heard from him, and I'm—yeah.

Bannon: And you can tell him he's the best person I ever worked for. I wish I'd stayed working for him.

Bryan: I will tell him that.

Bannon: And he is the only person who ever cared about his employees more than himself. Great guy. Smart businessman, and he's really on the forefront of a lot of everything that's going on.

[00:45:00 John Horan owns Horan McConaty in Colorado. He's moved to a lot of—he's doing a lot of cremation, and he has a cemetery specifically for cremation and cremains—which is something that's coming too.

[Signing release form; break in recording]

Bannon: No, that's their preference. That's a matter of their preference. See, we use a lot of— There's the morticians association, which is the black folks, and then we have the funeral directors' association. Now, personally, our funeral directors' association, they're nice people but they really don't do a lot. Let me rephrase that—they really can't help with lobbying or anything like that. See, the way the board used to be, there's a North Carolina Board of Funeral Service, which, it used to be funeral directors voted on those because, you know, we governed ourselves and everything worked great and was wonderful and good. [Talking about political tensions related to the board.]

[Break in recording]

Bannon: Women make excellent funeral directors. And they are not given their due respect in what they do,. Some people say that, "Oh, they can't move heavy bodies." Well, you know what? Nancy does it all the time. And I know lots of women who do.

But again, that's kind of an old-boy thing in your mind. But your mom takes care of you, and women are good at it. And there's a lot of—you have to have a lot in your heart to be able to touch a lot of people. You know, I hug a lot. I hug a lot of people. Because sometimes that's all you can do, is just give somebody a hug and let them cry it out. But women funeral directors are not given their due in this business. And it's changed a lot, of course. There's a bunch of them work for corporations that I can't stand because—yeah. They have a corporate mentality. [Discussing recommendations of interviewees.]

[Break in recording]

Bryan: Okay.

Bannon: The changes in decorum. I told you about them, the lady and them having a fight there. We've had to call the police three or four times, which I never had to do in 25 years. And it's getting worse and worse. Because people see all the stuff on TV, and think that's how it's supposed to be, and it's not. So people have lost the decorum that they used to have, the reverence for people. So that's—I mean, I've had whole families get into a fight at the cemetery. Literally the entire family. So that's sad. Yeah, that's sad.

Bryan: What do you think can change in the world that would—

Bannon: Ah, go back in time and never have the television invented. I don't know. Yeah, it's just, you would have never had that when I started out. People kept their stuff, and they fought at home, and things like that. [Sighs] Doesn't matter. Anyway.

Bryan: What about other ways that people behave at funerals, or how they dress at funerals. Has that changed?

[00:55:00] Bannon: Oh, it's changed a lot. And some people, you know, don't have a lot of money. So it used to be pallbearers wore suits, but now we just tell some families, or we're not saying, but we tell families, "It's okay if they just want to wear white golf shirts, or white button-up shirts and a pair of slacks." You know. That's changed, it's relaxed a lot. But when I go to church, it's like me and the minister are the only ones who wear a suit. Everybody else is comfortable. You know. And there's nothing wrong with that. You know. But that's just me trying to break the mold of how I was trained. So. Anyway. But yeah, between fights and—I mean, people getting up and yelling at people during the funeral, and cussing at them. That, like I said, it's just sad. You know. It breaks your heart.

Bryan: What sort of thing would cause that in a family?

Bannon: Oh! Second marriages, divorces. Ooh! That's the other thing I was going to tell you about. People being married, and then being married again, and then being married again without ever getting divorces. And then that's a sticky issue, especially with cremation, or if one person wants the person cremated and the other person doesn't want them cremated, because then they have to go to court to get the thing. But if you were to embalm the body to keep it from decomposing, because they decide to do it, then you get sued by the family if the judge decides that that first family was the one. But then if you don't do it, and then the other one says cremation—that's [?]. Everybody wants to sue everybody for everything. Over stuff that you can't control. That was it. That was the thing I was going to tell you. Second and third wives that nobody knows about, and then you've got three people coming in saying, "I'm the wife." You know.

Bryan: And in a way they're all right.

Bannon: Yeah. Yeah. So, you know.

Bryan: What do you do in that case? Is it the most recent?

Bannon: "Y'all have to go to"—yes, it happens all the time. All the time. I have a friend, he had a lady come in and she was married, then another wife came in and said she was still married to the man, so that he never got divorced and was married to both these ladies. And then so, you know, they were told, you know, "You're going to have to go to court and have a judge tell you what to do." Because either way, you can get sued. Or people don't tell you—that's a big change!—people don't tell you that there's a wife or they don't tell you there's children, and they say, "Oh, we don't know how to get in touch with them." "Well, you know, we have to have this." Because you have to sit there and you have to talk to people. Because [whispers] people lie to you. You have to talk to a lot of people, and they say, "Well, I'm the next of kin." "Well, do they have any children?" "Well, yeah, he has some kids, but they hadn't talked in years, and they're separated." "Were they ever adopted by anybody else?" "No." "Okay." Then you have to say, "Well, they're the ones who have to sign the paperwork, legally." And so, then, "Well, we don't know how to get in touch with them." Well, I tracked down one set of kids on Facebook, and you know, there's certain things you have to do, procedures you have to follow, but you always open yourself up to coming back and being sued later. That's one of the sucky things about cremation. Burial, you can always dig somebody up later. Cremation, you can't do anything. That is it. I will let you go.

[End of recording]